

LITERAL: I'M NOT HUNGRY.

Subtext: I'm upset and I don't want to
talk about it.

Cultural Context: In Southern
Black households, refusing food
can signal emotional withdrawal,
often seen as disrespect or
rebellion.



LITERAL: THAT'S INTERESTING.

Subtext: I completely disagree but I'm
being polite.

Cultural Context: A polite
deflection in white Southern or
Northern academic culture; can
be misread by literal
communicators.



LITERAL: SHE'S GOT A LOT GOING ON.

Subtext: She's going through serious problems.

Cultural Context: A coded phrase in Black communities that invites compassion while avoiding gossip.



LITERAL: YOU SURE YOU WANNA WEAR THAT?

Subtext: I don't think that outfit is appropriate.

Cultural Context: Southern
womanhood often polices
femininity through indirect
appearance cues.



LITERAL: BLESS HER HEART.

Subtext: She's pitiful.

Cultural Context: Classic
Southern phrase that
masquerades as kindness while
conveying pity, judgment, or even
scorn.



LITERAL: I'M JUST SAYING.

Subtext: I am trying to make a point, but
I don't want the conflict.

Cultural Context: Used to soften
disagreement or judgment in
indirect cultures; easily
misinterpreted by direct
communicators.



LITERAL: I'M FINE.

Subtext: I'm not fine.

Cultural Context: Universal neurotypical mask, often expected of women and people raised in environments where emotional vulnerability was punished.



LITERAL: WE'LL SEE.

Subtext: The answer is no, but I don't want to say it yet.

Cultural Context: Common in Black Southern parenting—vague promises used to avoid meltdowns or preserve control.



LITERAL: YOU DID YOUR BEST.

Subtext: I'm disappointed, but I still love you.

Cultural Context: Emotionally
layered phrase in Southern
families where praise is rare and
failure is taboo.



LITERAL: DON'T EMBARRASS ME.

Subtext: You're not just representing yourself, you're representing this family.

Cultural Context: Deeply tied to survival-based respectability politics in Black families under white surveillance.

